

January 2003

# Major Management Challenges and Program Risks

## Social Security Administration



## A Glance at the Agency Covered in This Report

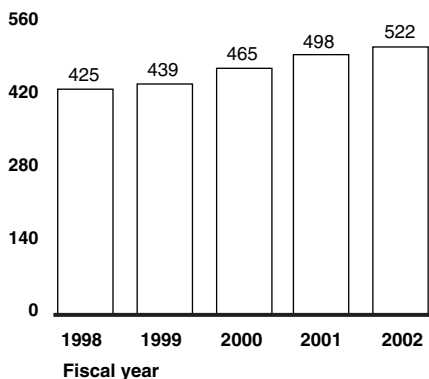
The Social Security Administration's mission is to promote the economic security of the nation's people. It administers three major federal programs that provide benefits to more than 50 million people.

- Old Age and Survivors Insurance and Disability Insurance, together commonly known as Social Security, provide benefits to retired and disabled workers and their dependents and survivors. These benefits are paid from trust funds financed through payroll taxes paid by workers and their employers and by the self-employed.
- Supplemental Security Income provides income for aged, blind, or disabled individuals with limited income and resources and is financed from general tax revenues.

## The Social Security Administration's Budgetary and Staff Resources

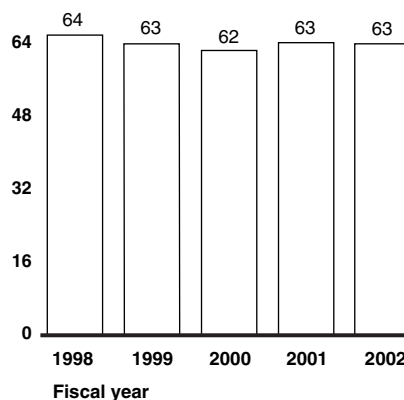
### Budgetary Resources <sup>a,b</sup>

Dollars in billions



### Staff Resources <sup>b</sup>

FTEs in thousands



Source: Budget of the United States Government.

<sup>a</sup> Budgetary resources include new budget authority (BA) and unobligated balances of previous BA. Totals include trust fund as well as general fund dollars.

<sup>b</sup> Budget and staff resources are actuals for FY 1998-2001. FY 2002 are estimates from the FY 2003 budget, which are the latest publicly available figures on a consistent basis as of January 2003. Actuals for FY 2002 will be contained in the President's FY 2004 budget to be released in February 2003.

## This Series

This report is part of a special GAO series, first issued in 1999 and updated in 2001, entitled the *Performance and Accountability Series: Major Management Challenges and Program Risks*. The 2003 Performance and Accountability Series contains separate reports covering each cabinet department, most major independent agencies, and the U.S. Postal Service. The series also includes a governmentwide perspective on transforming the way the government does business in order to meet 21st century challenges and address long-term fiscal needs. The companion 2003 *High-Risk Series: An Update* identifies areas at high risk due to either their greater vulnerabilities to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement or major challenges associated with their economy, efficiency, or effectiveness. A list of all of the reports in this series is included at the end of this report.

## Social Security Administration



Highlights of [GAO-03-117](#), a report to Congress included as part of GAO's Performance and Accountability Series

### Why GAO Did This Report

In its 2001 performance and accountability report on the Social Security Administration (SSA), GAO identified important issues relating to research capacity, its process for determining disability, management of a high-risk Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, future service delivery plans, and protection of information facing the agency. The information GAO presents in this report is intended to help to sustain congressional attention and an agency focus on continuing to make progress in addressing these challenges and ultimately overcoming them. This report is part of a special series of reports on governmentwide and agency-specific issues.

### What Remains to Be Done

GAO believes that SSA should

- sustain and expand the range of SSI program integrity initiatives underway,
- develop a long-term strategy for improving timeliness of claims processing and consistency in decisionmaking,
- develop a comprehensive return-to-work strategy for individuals with disabilities, and
- develop a concrete service delivery plan.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-117](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-117).

To view the full report, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barbara D. Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or [bovbjergb@gao.gov](mailto:bovbjergb@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

SSA has made progress in addressing problems with the integrity of the SSI program and in playing a more active role in research, evaluation, and policy development. Nevertheless, because of ongoing concerns about the positioning of SSA's disability programs to provide meaningful and timely support to Americans with disabilities, GAO has added modernizing federal disability programs to the 2003 high-risk list. In addition, the agency is continuing to face management challenges and needs to:

- **Continue to strengthen the integrity of the SSI program.** SSA's progress in developing new tools to improve SSI's financial integrity and management warrants removing the program's high-risk designation. However, the agency must completely implement the reforms it has undertaken and identify and move forward with options to simplify the program's complex policies.
- **Improve SSA's programs that provide support for individuals with disabilities.** Improving these programs will require updating disability criteria to reflect advances in medicine and technology, and changes in the workforce and developing a comprehensive return-to-work strategy. Further, after years of efforts to redesign its disability claims process, applicants still face a time-consuming process. However, the agency's new Commissioner has made its improvement a priority and has implemented several short-term initiatives to speed up the processing of disability claims on appeal.
- **Better position SSA for future service delivery challenges.** SSA has conducted extensive analyses of future staff retirements, but it has made decisions about succession planning and allowed early retirements without a concrete service delivery plan to detail how and where it will provide services in the future. In addition, its investments in information technology to facilitate service delivery need to be more closely tied to service delivery goals and objectives.
- **Strengthen controls to protect the personal information SSA develops and maintains.** Concerns about the widespread use of social security numbers (SSN), compounded by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, have heightened the need to assess how SSNs are issued and protected and how Social Security data are used by law enforcement agencies in safeguarding national security. Since the attacks, SSA has further restricted the assignment of SSNs to individuals not authorized to work and implemented new procedures for verifying the authenticity of identity documents to ensure that only those with a legal right to SSNs receive them.

---

# Contents

---

Transmittal Letter	1
Major Performance and Accountability Challenges	2
GAO Contacts	27
Related GAO Products	28
Performance and Accountability and High-Risk Series	31

This is a work of the U.S. Government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. It may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. It may contain copyrighted graphics, images or other materials. Permission from the copyright holder may be necessary should you wish to reproduce copyrighted materials separately from GAO's product.



United States General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

January 2003

The President of the Senate  
The Speaker of the House of Representatives

This report addresses the major management challenges facing the Social Security Administration (SSA) as it seeks to carry out its goal to “promote the economic security of the nation’s people through compassionate and vigilant leadership in shaping and managing America’s social security programs.” This report discusses the actions that SSA has taken and that are under way to address the challenges GAO identified in its Performance and Accountability Series 2 years ago, and major events that have occurred that significantly influence the environment in which the agency carries out its mission. Also, this report summarizes the challenges that remain and further actions that GAO believes are needed.

This analysis should help the new Congress and the administration carry out their responsibilities and improve government for the benefit of the American people. For additional information about this report, please contact Barbara D. Bovbjerg, Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, at (202) 512-7215 or at [bovbjergb@gao.gov](mailto:bovbjergb@gao.gov).

David M. Walker  
Comptroller General  
of the United States

---

# Major Performance and Accountability Challenges

---

In our January 2001 management challenges report,<sup>1</sup> we identified the following performance and management challenges that the Social Security Administration (SSA) needed to face: (1) playing an active research, evaluation, and policy development role; (2) improving its disability determination and return-to-work processes; (3) sustaining management and oversight of long-standing, high-risk Supplemental Security Income (SSI) issues; (4) better positioning itself for future service delivery challenges; and (5) further strengthening controls to protect SSA information.

Our January 2001 report also identified the long-term solvency and sustainability of the social security system as one of the most urgent policy challenges facing the nation and SSA. At issue is how to make SSA's programs fiscally sustainable as life expectancy increases and large numbers of Americans born in the baby boom generation become eligible for retirement. Over the past few years, a wide array of proposals has been put forth to restore Social Security's long-term solvency, and in December 2001, a commission appointed by the President presented three alternative proposals for reform. However, as the time approaches when Social Security's expenditures will exceed its income, there is still no consensus on a plan for reforming the social security system. Although policy decisions regarding Social Security's future are urgently needed, the challenges of addressing this problem are of a policy nature, and are not yet management challenges. Decisions about Social Security's future, once made, will pose implementation challenges that may well challenge SSA's management capacity farther in the future.

Since our January 2001 report, two events have occurred that have influenced the assessment of SSA's management challenges. First, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the indication that some of the terrorists fraudulently obtained social security numbers (SSN) have heightened concerns about protecting personal information and raised new concerns about using personal information such as the SSN. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, there is a greater urgency to find the proper balance between the widespread and legitimate uses of personal information such as SSNs by both government and the private sector and the need to protect SSNs from nonlegitimate access and use. Second, with the confirmation of a new Commissioner to a 6-year term in November

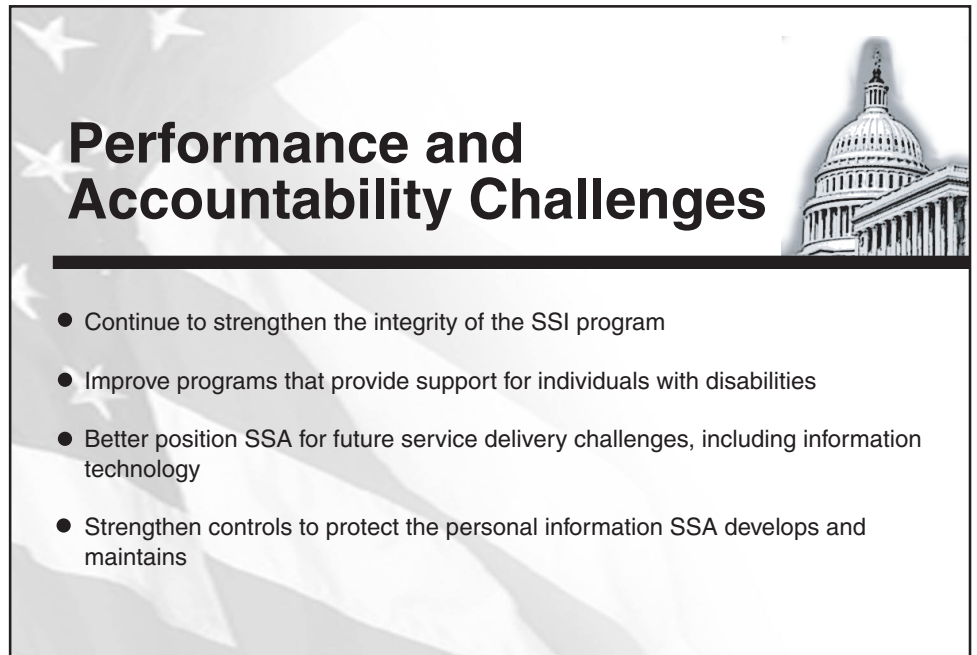
---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Social Security Administration*, [GAO-01-261](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 2001).

2001, SSA has sharpened its focus on addressing the challenges we previously identified. Building on work begun under the prior Commissioner, the agency has made considerable progress in addressing weaknesses in the integrity of the SSI program since our 2001 management challenges report. For example, SSA developed new tools to verify financial eligibility, established access to electronic databases to facilitate more timely verification of eligibility information, and expanded the methods it uses to collect overpayments. We are satisfied that this progress is sufficient to remove the high-risk designation of the integrity of the SSI program but caution that sustained management attention is needed to ensure that the implementation of all reforms is completed. Therefore, strengthening the integrity of the SSI program remains a major management challenge. Likewise, SSA has taken steps to strengthen its research, evaluation, and policy development activities such as funding outside research through its Retirement Research Consortium and Disability Research Institute and we have eliminated this issue as a separate management challenge. Nevertheless, the maintenance of these capabilities is vital to informing the debate over the long-term solvency of the social security system as well as addressing SSA's continuing management challenges, particularly in the disability area.

In spite of the increased focus on addressing the challenges we identified in our January 2001 report, many challenges remain. For example, while SSA has taken some steps to plan better for future service delivery changes and the information technology to support them, much work remains. Of greater concern are the complex challenges facing SSA's disability programs. SSA paid nearly \$80 billion in cash benefits to nearly 11 million people with a work-related disability and their families in 2001. These programs are growing, despite greater opportunities for people with disabilities to work. This growth is occurring at the same time that SSA is struggling to provide timely, consistent disability decisions to applicants. While the agency is taking actions to address these problems in the short term, longer-term solutions must include more fundamental changes to the programs, including those that may require legislative action. Because of these sustained challenges, we have added modernizing federal disability programs to our 2003 high-risk list.

In summary, SSA faces the following major management challenges that will further affect its ability to administer critical programs.

A graphic titled "Performance and Accountability Challenges" featuring a background of the American flag and a silhouette of the U.S. Capitol building. The title is in large, bold, black font. Below the title is a horizontal line, followed by a bulleted list of four challenges.

**Performance and Accountability Challenges**

- Continue to strengthen the integrity of the SSI program
- Improve programs that provide support for individuals with disabilities
- Better position SSA for future service delivery challenges, including information technology
- Strengthen controls to protect the personal information SSA develops and maintains

## SSA's Progress in Addressing SSI Overpayment Issues Warrants Removal of High-Risk Designation, but Management Challenges Remain

The SSI program is the nation's largest cash assistance program for the poor. We designated SSI a high-risk program in 1997, after several years of reporting on specific instances of abuse and mismanagement, increasing overpayments, and poor recovery of outstanding SSI overpayments. The SSI program poses a special challenge for SSA because, unlike Old Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) and Disability Insurance (DI), it is a means-tested program; thus, SSA must collect and verify information on income, resources, and recipient living arrangements to determine initial and continuing eligibility for the program.

In response to our high-risk designation, SSA has made sufficient progress in improving SSI's financial integrity and management to warrant removing its high-risk designation. SSA's actions include developing a major SSI legislative proposal with numerous overpayment deterrence and recovery provisions. Many of these provisions were incorporated into the Foster Care Independence Act, which was signed into law in December 1999. The act directly addresses a number of our prior recommendations and



provides SSA with additional tools to obtain applicant income and resource information from financial institutions; imposes a period of ineligibility for applicants who transfer assets to qualify for SSI benefits; and authorizes the use of credit bureaus, private collection agencies, interest levies, and other means to recover overpayments. SSA also obtained separate legislative authority in 1998 to recover overpayments from former SSI recipients who currently receive OASI or DI benefits and has recently begun the process of recovering overpayments from Social Security benefits of individuals no longer on the SSI rolls.

In addition to obtaining the new legislative authorities, SSA has initiated a number of internal administrative actions to further strengthen SSI program integrity. These include using tax refund offsets for collecting SSI overpayments, an action that SSA said resulted in \$221 million in additional overpayment recoveries from 1998 through the end of calendar year 2001. SSA also uses more frequent (monthly) automated matches to identify ineligible SSI recipients living in nursing homes and other institutions. As of January 2001, SSA's field offices also gained on-line access to wage, new-hire, and unemployment insurance data maintained by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. These data are key to field staff's ability to more quickly verify employment and income information essential to determining SSI eligibility and benefit levels. Since 1998, the number of state agencies allowing direct SSA on-line access to state data has nearly doubled. In addition, SSA increased the number of SSI financial redeterminations that it conducted, from about 1.8 million in fiscal year 1997 to about 2.4 million in fiscal year 2001. These reviews focus on income and resource factors affecting eligibility and payment amounts.

SSA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) has also increased the level of resources and staff devoted to investigating SSI fraud and abuse. Key among these efforts is the formation of Cooperative Disability Investigation teams in 13 field locations. These teams are designed to identify fraud and abuse before SSI benefits are approved and paid. Finally, in response to our prior recommendation,<sup>2</sup> SSA has revised its field office work credit and measurement system to better reward staff for time spent developing fraud referrals. If properly implemented, such measures should provide field staff

---

<sup>2</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Supplemental Security Income: Action Needed on Long-Standing Problems Affecting Program Integrity*, GAO/HEHS-98-158 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 14, 1998).

with much needed incentives for preventing fraud and abuse and controlling overpayments.

Although SSA's current initiatives demonstrate a stronger management commitment to SSI integrity issues and have the potential to significantly improve program management, their impacts are still not fully realized. A number of the agency's initiatives—especially those associated with the Foster Care Independence Act—are in the early planning or implementation stages and have yet to yield results. In addition, at this stage, the effect of SSA's enhanced matching efforts, on-line access tools, and other internal initiatives on the agency's ability to recover and avoid overpayments is unknown. Also unknown is the effect of the agency's efforts to improve the accuracy of SSI financial eligibility decisions. Thus, ongoing and outstanding overpayments are still at high levels, even though the prospects for reduction have improved.

SSA also has not yet addressed a key program vulnerability—program complexity—that is associated with SSI overpayments. In prior work, we have reported that SSI living arrangement and in-kind support and maintenance policies used by SSA to calculate eligibility and benefit amounts were complex, prone to error, and a major source of overpayments.<sup>3</sup> In the same report, we also recommended that SSA develop options for simplifying the program. Last year, SSA's policy office issued a study that discussed various options for simplifying complex SSI policies. Although SSA is considering various options, it has not moved forward in recommending specific proposals for change.

We believe that sustained management attention is necessary to improve SSI program integrity. Following our most recent review of SSA's progress,<sup>4</sup> the agency agreed with our recommendations to

- sustain and expand its program integrity activities underway and continue to develop additional tools to improve program operations and management;

---

<sup>3</sup> [GAO/HEHS-98-158](#).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Supplemental Security Income: Progress Made in Detecting and Recovering Overpayments, but Management Attention Should Continue*, [GAO-02-849](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 2002).

- identify and move forward with implementing cost-effective options for simplifying complex policies;
- evaluate current policies for applying penalties for individuals who fail to report essential eligibility information and remove barriers to their use and effectiveness; and
- reexamine its policies for waiving recovery of SSI overpayments.

---

## Long-Standing Challenges in SSA's Disability Programs Warrant High-Risk Designation

SSA's disability programs have been growing and are poised to grow even more rapidly as more baby boomers reach their disability-prone years. Yet the statutory and regulatory design of these programs remain mired in concepts from the past and are poorly positioned to provide meaningful and timely support for Americans with disabilities. These outdated concepts persist despite scientific advances and economic and social changes that have redefined the relationship between impairments and the ability to work. In addition, while SSA has taken some steps in trying to return beneficiaries to work, it has not developed, as we have recommended, a comprehensive return-to-work strategy that focuses on identifying and enhancing beneficiaries' work capacities. Finally, as the programs have grown, SSA has struggled to provide timely and consistent disability decisions to program applicants. SSA's new Commissioner has made some progress addressing some of these problems and the agency has implemented some short-term remedies while it is developing longer-range plans to solve these problems. However, much more work needs to be done. Ultimately, developing solutions to the problems facing these disability programs will require consultation and cooperation between the executive and legislative branches as well as cross-agency efforts, and will likely require statutory as well as regulatory action. Our designation of SSA's disability programs as high risk can serve as a catalyst to bring together the partners needed to resolve these long-standing problems. As we have previously stated, as the primary manager of multibillion dollar programs and as the entity with fiduciary responsibility for the trust funds, SSA must take the lead in forging the partnerships and cooperation that will be needed in reorienting the federal disability programs.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *SSA Disability: Return-to-Work Strategies From Other Systems May Improve Federal Programs*, [GAO/HEHS-96-133](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 11, 1996).

---

---

Reexamination of Disability  
Criteria Needed to  
Acknowledge Changes in  
Medicine as Well as the  
Economy and Labor Market

To modernize the disability programs, SSA needs to reexamine the criteria it uses to determine whether individuals are disabled. The criteria include medical as well as vocational factors. Over time, medical and technological advances have provided a better understanding of how medical conditions affect the ability to work. Likewise, changes in the labor market have affected the skills needed to perform work and the settings in which work occurs. However, SSA has not fully updated its disability criteria to determine who is unable to work to reflect these changes. Using outdated information raises questions about the validity of its disability decisions, and SSA risks overcompensating some individuals while undercompensating or denying compensation entirely to others.

About 12 years ago, SSA began reviewing relevant medical advances and updating the criteria used to evaluate disability claims. These updates include adding or dropping conditions that qualify one for benefits, modifying the criteria needed to establish the presence and severity of certain medical conditions, and wording changes for clarification and guidance in decision making. SSA's efforts to update the criteria were curtailed in the mid-1990s due to staff shortages, competing priorities, and lack of adequate research on disability issues. The updates resumed in 1998, but progress has been slow and the lengthy time frames could undermine the very purpose of an update. Keeping to a set schedule and making necessary updates could help SSA minimize the use of outmoded criteria in a large number of disability decisions.

In addition, because of the limited role of treatment in the statutory and regulatory design of the programs, the updates have not fully captured the benefits afforded by advances in treatment. SSA's regulations require that in order to receive benefits, claimants must follow treatment prescribed by the individual's physician, if the treatment can restore his or her ability to work. The implication of this regulation is that if an individual is not prescribed treatment, SSA does not consider the possible effects of treatment in the disability decision, even if the treatment could make the difference between being able and not being able to work. Moreover, the disability programs do not require individuals to receive nonprescribed treatment before or during the time they are assessed for eligibility. Thus, treatments that can help restore functioning to persons with certain impairments may not be factored into the disability decision for some applicants. For example, the effects that medication to control severe mental illness may have on an applicant's ability to work are not automatically factored into SSA's disability decision making. Likewise, efforts to update the programs' criteria have not incorporated innovations

in assistive technologies—such as advanced prosthetics and wheelchairs—because of similar program design issues.

Further, SSA's disability criteria have not incorporated labor market changes. For applicants who do not have impairments that SSA presumes are severe enough ordinarily to prevent work, SSA evaluates whether they are able to work despite their limitations. Individuals who are unable to perform their previous work and other work in the national economy are awarded benefits. SSA uses an outdated database—last updated in 1991—for information on the types and demands of occupations in the national economy in determining the impact that impairments have on individuals' earning capacity. The agency is working on identifying a replacement database, but this could take years to complete.

While SSA has not fully updated its disability criteria, it has started a number of studies that recognize that medical advances and social changes require the disability program to evolve. SSA has funded a project through its Disability Research Institute (DRI)<sup>6</sup> to design a study assessing the validity of its medical criteria as measures of disability and has begun work to design a study to identify the most salient job demands compared to a claimant's remaining capacity for work. In addition, SSA has funded a study through the DRI to examine the impact and cost of assistive technology on employment of persons with spinal cord injuries.

Updating disability criteria within existing program structures is prudent, not only as a means to best ensure program integrity, but also for SSA to meet its fiduciary responsibilities for public funds. To fully incorporate scientific advances and labor market changes into the disability programs would require more fundamental change, such as revisiting the programs' basic orientation. Reorienting programs in this direction would align them with broader social changes that focus on building and supporting the work capacities of people with disabilities. Such a reorientation would require examining complex program design issues such as beneficiaries' access to medical care and assistive technologies, the benefits offered and their associated costs, mechanisms to return beneficiaries to work, as well as the integration of SSA's programs with other programs and policies affecting people with disabilities. Success in implementing fundamental

---

<sup>6</sup> SSA awarded a 5-year cooperative agreement in 2000 to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to participate in its Disability Research Institute to plan and conduct a broad range of research that will develop disability policy information.

change to the orientation of the disability programs will be dependent upon consultation and cooperation between the executive and legislative branches as well as cross-agency efforts, and will likely require statutory as well as regulatory action.

---

## SSA Lacks a Comprehensive Strategy to Return People with Disabilities to Work

The number of working-age beneficiaries of the DI and SSI programs has increased by 61 percent over the past 10 years, even as changes in medicine, technology, society, and the nature of work have increased the potential for some people with disabilities to return to, or remain in, the labor force. Legislative changes have also focused on returning disability beneficiaries to work. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 supports the premise that people with disabilities can work and have the right to work, and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 increased beneficiaries' access to vocational services. Indeed, many beneficiaries with disabilities indicate that they want to work, and many may be able to work in today's labor market if they receive needed support. In 1996, we recommended that SSA place a greater priority on helping disabled beneficiaries work,<sup>7</sup> and the agency has taken a number of actions to improve its return-to-work practices. But even with these actions, SSA has achieved poor results in this arena and few DI and SSI beneficiaries leave the disability rolls to work.

Even in light of the Ticket to Work Act, SSA will continue to face difficulties in returning beneficiaries to work, in part, owing to weaknesses, both statutory and policy, in the design of the disability programs. As we have reported in the past, these weaknesses include an either-or disability decision-making process that characterizes individuals as either unable to work or having the capacity to work and therefore ineligible for benefits.<sup>8</sup> This either-or process produces a strong incentive for applicants to establish their inability to work to qualify for benefits.

Moreover, return-to-work services are offered only after a lengthy determination process. Because applicants are either unemployed or only marginally connected to the labor force when they apply and remain so during the eligibility determination process, their skills, work habits, and

---

<sup>7</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *SSA Disability: Program Redesign Necessary to Encourage Return to Work*, GAO/HEHS-96-62 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 24, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> GAO/HEHS-96-62.

motivation to work are likely to deteriorate during this wait. Thus, individuals who have successfully established their disability may have little reason or desire to attempt rehabilitation and work. Unlike some private sector disability insurers and foreign social insurance systems, SSA does not incorporate into its initial or continuing eligibility assessment process an evaluation of what is needed for an individual to return to work. Instead of receiving assistance to stay in the workforce or return to work—and thus to stay off the long-term disability rolls—an individual can obtain assistance through DI or SSI only by proving his or her inability to work. And even in its efforts to redesign the decision-making process, SSA has yet to incorporate into these initiatives an evaluation of what an individual may need to return to work.

In addition, SSA has made limited progress in developing baseline data to measure progress in the return-to-work area. In June 2000, we reported that many of SSA's fiscal year 2001 performance measures were not sufficiently results-oriented, making it difficult to track progress.<sup>9</sup> SSA's fiscal year 2002 performance plan showed that it had begun to incorporate more outcome-oriented performance indicators that could support its efforts in this area. Two new indicators, in particular, could help SSA gauge progress: (1) the percentage increase in the number of DI beneficiaries whose benefits are suspended or terminated owing to employment and (2) the percentage increase in the number of disabled SSI beneficiaries no longer receiving cash benefits. However, SSA did not set specific performance targets for these measures, but instead established interim indicators to measure the start of work activity. In its 2003 performance plan, SSA has refined these interim indicators to more closely track outcomes related to employment, but it has postponed implementing the permanent indicators from 2005 until 2007 while it develops new computer systems to collect data to measure these indicators.

SSA has nevertheless recently stepped up its return-to-work efforts, in part, in response to mandates from the Ticket to Work legislation. For example, it has (1) established an Office of Employment Support Programs to promote the employment of beneficiaries with disabilities; (2) recruited more than 400 public or private entities to provide vocational rehabilitation, employment, and other support services to beneficiaries

---

<sup>9</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Observations on the Social Security Administration's Fiscal Year 1999 Performance Report and Fiscal Year 2001 Performance Plan*, GAO/HEHS-00-126R (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2000).

under the Ticket to Work Program; (3) raised and indexed to a measure of wage growth the limit on the amount a DI beneficiary can earn from work and still receive benefits to encourage people with disabilities to work; (4) funded 12 state partnership agreements that are intended to help the states develop services to increase beneficiary employment; (5) provided funding to more than 100 community-based organizations to help provide work incentives planning and assistance to beneficiaries; and (6) completed a pilot study on the deployment of work incentive specialists to SSA field offices and is currently determining how to best implement the position nationally.

Further, SSA has progressed in researching issues related to return-to-work through its DRI. Current research underway includes: (1) designing a demonstration to provide earlier return-to-work services to DI applicants who are likely to be found eligible; (2) exploring the paths DI applicants and beneficiaries took to the benefit program to determine whether SSA might be able to redirect some applicants to work rather than a prolonged stay on the benefit rolls; (3) examining how the onset of disability early in life affects later employment outcomes; and (4) analyzing and facilitating the transition to employment of youths with disabilities.

While these efforts represent positive steps in trying to return people with disabilities to work, much remains to be done. As we have recommended previously, SSA still needs to move forward in developing a comprehensive return-to-work strategy that integrates, as appropriate, earlier intervention, including earlier and more effective identification of work capacities and the expansion of such capacities by providing essential return-to-work assistance for applicants and beneficiaries.<sup>10</sup> Adopting such a strategy is likely to require improvements to staff skill levels and areas of expertise, as well as changes to the disability determination process. It will also require fundamental changes to the underlying philosophy and direction of the DI and SSI programs, as well as legislative changes in some cases. Policymakers will need to carefully weigh the implications of such changes. Nevertheless, we remain concerned that the absence of such a strategy and accompanying performance plan goals may hinder SSA's efforts to make significant strides in the return-to-work area, including its efforts to improve the disability determination process. An improved return-to-work strategy could benefit both the beneficiaries who want to work and the American taxpayer.

---

<sup>10</sup> [GAO/HEHS-96-133](#).



---

---

Results of Efforts to  
Improve the Disability  
Claims Process Have Been  
Disappointing

SSA's disability determination process is time-consuming, complex, and expensive. The agency has been working for years to improve this process, yet, ensuring the quality and timeliness of its disability decisions remains one of SSA's greatest challenges. Individuals who are initially denied benefits by SSA and appeal their claims may wait a year or more for a final decision on their eligibility. These long waits result, in part, from complex and fragmented decision-making processes that are laden with many layers of reviews and multiple handoffs from one person to another. The cost of administering the DI and SSI programs reflects the demanding nature of the process. Although SSI and DI program benefits account for less than 20 percent of the total benefit payments made by SSA, they consume nearly 55 percent of the annual administrative resources.

In addition to its difficulties in processing claims, SSA has also had difficulty ensuring that decisions regarding a claimant's eligibility for disability benefits are accurate and consistent across all levels of the decision-making process. Our work shows that in fiscal year 2000, about 40 percent of the applicants whose cases were denied at the initial level appealed this decision and about two-thirds of those who appealed were awarded benefits.<sup>11</sup> This happens in part because decision makers at the initial level use a different approach to evaluate claims and make decisions than those at the appellate level. The inconsistency of decisions at these two levels has raised questions about the fairness, integrity, and cost of SSA's disability programs.

---

<sup>11</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Social Security Disability: Efforts to Improve Claims Process Have Fallen Short and Further Action is Needed*, [GAO-02-826T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 11, 2002).

In 1994, SSA laid out a plan to address these problems; however, that plan and three subsequent revisions have yielded only limited success. Among other things, SSA planned to develop a streamlined decision-making and appeal process, more consistent guidance and training for decision makers at all levels of the process, and an improved process for reviewing the quality of eligibility decisions. Our reviews of SSA's efforts found that the agency had accomplished little.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, the plans were too large and too complex to keep on track, and the results of many of the initiatives that were tested fell far short of expectations. Moreover, the agency was not able to garner consistent stakeholder support and cooperation for its proposed changes. Despite the overall disappointing progress, the agency did issue formal guidance in a number of areas intended to improve the consistency of decisions between the initial and appellate levels.

Overall, however, significant problems persist and difficult decisions remain. For example, SSA is currently collecting data on the results from an initiative known as the Prototype, which was implemented in 10 states in October 1999 to test several modifications to the disability determination process. Although interim data indicated that the Prototype would result in more awards made correctly at the initial level, it also would increase the number of appeals of denied claims. This, in turn, would result in both higher administrative and benefit costs and lengthen the wait for final decisions on claims. As a result, SSA modified the Prototype initiative and is collecting more data on results. It remains to be seen whether these revisions will retain the positive results from the Prototype while also controlling administrative and program costs.

---

<sup>12</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *SSA Disability Redesign: Focus Needed on Initiatives Most Crucial to Reducing Costs and Time*, [GAO/HEHS-97-20](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 20, 1996); *SSA Disability Redesign: Actions Needed to Enhance Future Progress*, [GAO/HEHS-99-25](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 1999); and *Social Security Disability: Disappointing Results From SSA's Efforts to Improve the Disability Claims Process Warrant Immediate Attention*, [GAO-02-322](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2002).

Even more pressing in the near term is the management and workload crisis that SSA faces in its hearings offices. The agency's 1999 plan included an initiative to overhaul operations at its hearing offices to increase efficiency and significantly reduce processing times at that level; however, this nationwide effort has not only failed to achieve its goals, it has, in some cases, made things worse. The initiative has suffered, in part, from problems associated with implementing large-scale changes too quickly without resolving known problems. As a result, the average case processing time slowed and backlogs of cases waiting to be processed approached crisis levels. We have recommended that the Commissioner act quickly to implement short-term strategies to reduce the backlog and develop a long-range strategy for a more permanent solution to the backlog and efficiency problems at the Office of Hearings and Appeals.<sup>13</sup> According to SSA officials, they have implemented several short-term initiatives not requiring statutory or regulatory changes to reduce hearing office processing times and backlogs. These include new formats and software to facilitate the issuance of favorable decisions, guidelines for the issuance of favorable bench decisions, and awarding contracts to speed the assembly of hearing files.

Finally, SSA's 1994 plan to redesign the claims process called for the agency to revamp its existing quality assurance system. However, because of disagreement among SSA and state employee groups, unions, and interest groups on how to accomplish this difficult objective, progress in this area has been limited. We agreed with a March 2001 contractor assessment that a significant overhaul was needed to encompass a more comprehensive view of quality management and recommended that SSA develop an action plan for implementing a more comprehensive and sophisticated quality assurance program.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the new Commissioner has signaled the high priority she attaches to this effort by appointing a senior manager for quality who reports directly to her. The senior manager and her team have devised a 4-phase strategy to establish a quality oriented approach to all SSA processes. As part of the first phase, the team has developed an agency level definition of quality that incorporates the elements of accuracy, timeliness, productivity, cost, and customer service.

---

<sup>13</sup> [GAO-02-322](#).

<sup>14</sup> [GAO-02-322](#).

The limited results of some of these initiatives can be linked, in part, to slow progress in incorporating technological improvements into the disability determination process. As originally envisioned, SSA's redesign plan depended on these improvements. After spending about 7 years designing and developing a new computer software application to automate the disability claims process, SSA decided to discontinue the initiative in July 1999, citing software performance problems and delays in developing the software.

In August 2000, SSA issued a new management plan to develop the agency's electronic disability system. SSA expects this effort to move the agency toward a paperless disability claims process. The strategy consists of several key components, including (1) an electronic claims intake process for the field offices, (2) enhanced state disability determination service agencies' claims processing systems, and (3) technology processes necessary to support the operation of Office of Hearing and Appeals. The components are to be linked to one another through the use of an electronic folder that is being designed to transmit data from one processing location to another and to serve as a data repository, storing documents that are keyed in, scanned, or faxed. SSA is currently implementing the automated intake process in its field offices. In addition, it recently expanded the capabilities of its Internet application process to include collecting information about the medical treatment and work history needed to process disability claims. Further, SSA has stepped up its schedule for implementing the electronic disability system from late in 2005 to January 2004. As SSA proceeds with this new system, it is imperative that the agency effectively identify, track, and manage the costs, benefits, schedule, and risks associated with the system's full development and implementation. Moreover, SSA must ensure that it has the right mix of skills and capabilities to support this initiative and that desired end results are achieved.

SSA is at a crossroads in its efforts to redesign and improve its disability claims process. Since its start in 1994, SSA's redesign initiatives have yielded limited progress and often disappointing results. SSA's new Commissioner has acknowledged the limited progress to date, has made the issue one of the agency's priorities, and has taken the first steps to address this problem. However, as we testified in May 2002, it may be appropriate, given the agency's past experience, for SSA to undertake a new and comprehensive analysis of the fundamental issues impeding progress.<sup>15</sup> Such an analysis should include reassessing the root causes contributing to its problems and would encompass concerns raised by the Social Security Advisory Board,<sup>16</sup> such as the fragmentation and structural problems in the agency's disability determination process. The outcome of this analysis may, in some cases, require legislative changes.

---

## SSA Needs to Better Position Itself for Future Service Delivery Challenges

Among federal agencies, SSA has long been viewed as one of the leaders in service delivery. SSA considers service delivery as one of its top priorities, and its current performance plan includes specific goals and strategies to provide accurate, timely, and useful service to the public. However, three factors—(1) the expected increase in demand for services as baby boomers retire, (2) the concurrent retirement of a large part of its own workforce, and (3) changing customer expectations—could hamper SSA's ability to provide high-quality service over the next decade and beyond. In response to these challenges, SSA has initiated several workforce activities based on its analysis of future retirements and has begun to envision what its future service delivery might be. In addition, it has begun to expand its electronic service delivery capabilities to meet changing customer expectations. However, without a service delivery plan that lays out a detailed blueprint for how service will be delivered in the future, SSA cannot ensure that it will effectively cope with its future service challenges. Further, as the agency transitions to electronic processes, it will be challenged to think strategically about its information technology (IT) investments and to ensure their effectiveness by linking them to service delivery goals and performance.

---

<sup>15</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Social Security Administration: Agency Must Position Itself Now to Meet Profound Challenges*, [GAO-02-289T](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> The Social Security Independence and Program Improvements Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-296) created a seven member bipartisan Advisory Board to advise the President, the Congress, and the Commissioner of Social Security on matters relating to the Social Security and SSI programs.

---

---

SSA Needs to Develop a  
Concrete Service Delivery  
Plan

Demand for services will grow rapidly as the baby boom generation ages and enters the disability prone years and retirement soon after. By 2010, SSA expects worker applications for DI to increase by as much as 32 percent over 2000 levels. As we have observed earlier in this report, SSA already has trouble managing its disability determination workload; adding additional cases without rectifying serious case processing issues will only make things worse. Furthermore, by 2010, SSA projects that applications for retirement benefits will also increase dramatically—by 31 percent over the 2000 levels.

SSA's ability to provide high-quality service delivery is also potentially weakened by challenges regarding its workforce. First, SSA's workforce is aging, and SSA is predicting a retirement wave that will peak in the years 2007 through 2010, when it expects about 2,500 employees to retire each year. By 2010, SSA projects that about 37 percent of its almost 62,000 employees will retire. The percentage is higher for employees in SSA's supervisory or managerial ranks. In particular, more than 70 percent of SSA's upper-level managers and executives (GS-14, GS-15, and SES level) are expected to retire by 2010. Second, SSA will need to increase staff skills to deal with changing customer expectations and needs. SSA's staff will need to obtain and continually update the skills needed to use the most current technology available to serve the public in a more convenient, cost effective, and secure manner. At the same time, some aspects of SSA's customer service workload will likely become more time consuming and labor intensive, owing primarily to the growing proportion of SSA's non-English speaking customers and the rising number of disability cases involving mental impairments. Both situations result in more complex cases that require diverse staff skills.

SSA has a number of workforce initiatives under way to help it prepare for the future. For example, as required by law, SSA developed a workforce transition plan to lay out actions to help ensure that its workforce will be able to handle future service delivery challenges. In addition, recognizing that it will shortly be facing the prospect of increasing retirements, SSA conducted a study that predicts staff retirements and attrition each year, from 1999 to 2020, by major job position and agency component. SSA also began to take steps to fill its expected leadership gap. We have long stressed the importance of succession planning and formal programs to develop and train managers at all levels of SSA. As early as 1993, we recommended that SSA make succession planning a permanent aspect of its workforce planning and evaluate the adequacy of its investments in management training and development.<sup>17</sup> SSA created three new leadership development programs to help prepare selected staff to assume mid- and top-level leadership positions at the agency. Overall, many of the efforts being made today are consistent with principles of human capital management, which is fundamental to the federal government's ability to serve the American people.

However, SSA is taking these human capital measures in the absence of a concrete service delivery plan to help guide its investments. We also recommended in 1993 that SSA complete such a service delivery plan to ensure that its human capital and other key investments are put to the best use.<sup>18</sup> In 1998, the agency took a first step by beginning a multiyear project to monitor and measure the needs, expectations, priorities, and satisfaction of customer groups, major stakeholders, and its workforce. In 2000, SSA completed a document that articulates how it envisions the agency functioning in the future.<sup>19</sup> For example, SSA anticipates offering services in person, over the telephone, and via the Internet; according to this document, its telephonic and electronic access services will be equipped with sophisticated voice recognition and language translation features, and work will be accomplished through a paperless process. In its service vision document, SSA also states that it will rely heavily on a workforce

---

<sup>17</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Social Security: Sustained Effort Needed to Improve Management and Prepare for the Future*, [GAO/HRD-94-22](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> [GAO/HRD-94-22](#). Also, see [GAO/T-HEHS-98-113](#) and [GAO/HEHS-96-196](#).

<sup>19</sup> This document was originally called "2010 Vision," but was subsequently renamed "SSA's Service Vision."

---

with diverse and updated skills to accomplish its mission. Although this new vision represents a positive step for the agency toward acknowledging and preparing for future service delivery challenges, it is too broad and general to be useful in making specific information technology and workforce decisions. We have stressed that this document should be followed by a more detailed service delivery plan that spells out who will provide what type of services in the future, where these services will be made available, and the steps and timetables for accomplishing needed changes. SSA needs this plan to ensure that its investments in its workforce and technology are consistent with and fully support its future approach to service delivery.

---

**SSA Needs Effective  
Management of Information  
Technology to Support  
Future Service Delivery**

SSA has devoted considerable time and effort to identifying strategies to meet its goal of providing world-class service. For example, SSA has begun expanding its electronic service delivery capability—offering retirees the option of applying for benefits on-line as well as pursuing other on-line or Internet options to facilitate customer access to the agency’s information and services. Yet SSA’s overall success in meeting its service delivery challenge will depend on how effectively it manages its information technology initiatives and links its investments in this area to its service delivery goals and performance. Further, its actions and decisions must effectively address dual modes of service delivery—its traditional services via telephone, face-to-face, and mail contacts that are supported primarily by its mainframe computer operations, as well as a more interactive, on-line, Web based environment aimed at delivering more readily accessible services in response to changing customer expectations.



Our evaluation of SSA's information technology policies, procedures, and practices in five key areas—investment management, enterprise architecture, software development and acquisition, human capital, and information security—found that the agency has many important information technology management policies and procedures in place. For instance, it has sound policies and procedures for software development that were consistent with best practices. However, SSA has not implemented its policies and procedures uniformly and has not established several key policies and procedures essential to ensuring that its information technology investments and human capital were effectively managed. We have noted weaknesses in each of the five key areas and recommended in this report 20 specific actions to improve SSA's information technology management practices.<sup>20</sup> SSA has agreed with all of the recommendations.

To illustrate, in making decisions on technology projects, SSA lacks key criteria and regular oversight for ensuring consistent investment management and decision-making practices. It also does not always consider costs, benefits, schedules, and risks when making project selections and as part of its ongoing management controls. Without such information, SSA cannot be assured that its investment proposals will provide the most cost-effective solutions and achieve measurable and specific program-related benefits, such as high-quality service delivered on time, within cost, and to the customer's satisfaction. Further, given competing priorities and funding needs, SSA will need such information to make essential trade offs among its information technology investment proposals and set priorities that can maximize the potential for both short- and long-term improvements to services provided to the public.

As SSA pursues Internet and Web based applications to better serve its customers, it must ensure that these efforts are aligned with the agency's information technology environment. A key element for achieving this is the successful implementation of an enterprise architecture, a blueprint for systematically and completely defining its current (baseline) and desired (target) environment. It is essential for developing and implementing information systems, and inserting emerging technologies that optimally support the agency's mission. We found that SSA has not completed key elements of its enterprise architecture, including (1) finalizing its

---

<sup>20</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Information Technology Management: Social Security Administration Practices Can Be Improved*, [GAO-01-961](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 21, 2001).

enterprise architecture framework, (2) updating and organizing its architectures and architecture definitions under the framework, and (3) reflecting its future service delivery vision and e-business goals.

As SSA moves forward in implementing electronic services and other technologies, its architecture will be critical to defining, managing, and enforcing adherence to the framework required to support its current and future information processing needs. In surveying 116 agencies across the federal government, we found the use of enterprise architectures by many agencies to be a work in progress, with much left to be accomplished.<sup>21</sup> Even within this group, SSA is at a relatively low level of maturity in enterprise architecture management.

SSA plans to rely extensively on software-intensive systems to help achieve processing efficiencies and improved customer service. SSA established new policies and procedures to enhance the quality of its software development. However, our evaluation found that SSA was not consistently applying them to its software development projects. In particular, SSA had not applied sound management and technical practices in developing the electronic disability system.<sup>22</sup> The use of sound, disciplined software development processes is critical to ensuring that SSA delivers quality software on schedule and within established cost estimates and can meet its goal of developing a technological infrastructure to support its service delivery vision.

As SSA places increased emphasis on using information technology to support new ways of delivering service, it must also ensure that it effectively manages its human capital to anticipate, plan for, and support its requirements. However, SSA had not taken all of the necessary steps to ensure the adequacy of its future information technology workforce. For instance, although SSA had begun evaluating its short- and long-term information technology needs, it had not linked its information technology staffing needs to the competencies required to meet the agency's mission goals. Doing so is necessary to ensure that SSA's plans project workforce

---

<sup>21</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Information Technology: Enterprise Architecture Use Across the Federal Government Can Be Improved*, [GAO-02-6](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 19, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Social Security Administration: Update on Year 2000 and Other Key Information Technology Initiatives*, [GAO/T-AIMD-99-259](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 1999).

needs far enough in advance to allow adequate time for staff recruitment and hiring, skills refreshment and training, or outsourcing considerations. Shortcomings in SSA's information technology human capital management could have serious ramifications as the agency moves toward making larger investments in new electronic service delivery options, such as Internet applications. Developing Internet applications represents a new era for SSA—one in which the agency must ensure that it has enough of the right people and skills to bring its electronic service delivery plan to fruition.

As SSA proceeds with the development and implementation of Internet and Web based initiatives, the need for a strong program to address threats to the security and integrity of its operations will grow. Without proper safeguards, these initiatives pose enormous risks that make it easier for individuals and groups with malicious intentions to intrude into inadequately protected systems and use such access to obtain sensitive information, commit fraud, disrupt operations, or launch attacks against other organizations' sites.

SSA has made progress in addressing the information protection issues raised in prior years. Specifically, during fiscal year 2002, the agency issued final risk models to standardize platform security configurations, established monitoring tools for enforcement of standards, improved firewall controls, continued progress on a program to monitor and control system user access requirements, strengthened physical security controls in regional offices, and implemented procedures for enhanced review of security violations on the mainframe.

Nonetheless, weaknesses in SSA's information security program continue to threaten its ability to effectively mitigate the risk of unauthorized access to, and disclosure of, sensitive information. A recent audit by an independent public accounting firm included recommendations that SSA continue to conduct periodic risk assessments to identify inherent vulnerabilities from emerging technologies, continue to implement risk models to achieve compliance with SSA standard platform security configuration settings, accelerate the program to ensure that sensitive systems are adequately addressed, ensure use of the new procedures for reviewing security violations on its mainframe, ensure that employees with access to sensitive SSA data and equipment are properly assessed to determine their eligibility for access, coordinate contingency planning among SSA components, and continue to enhance the overall security

---

policy and improve physical security controls for the disability determination services sites.

---

## The Need to Protect Personal Information Has Gained New Urgency

SSA is responsible for issuing SSNs, which are used to record wage data, maintain earnings records, and efficiently administer its benefit programs.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the SSN is also used by other government agencies as well as the private sector. This widespread use offers many benefits; however, combined with an increase in reports of identity theft, such use has raised public concern over how SSNs and other personal information are being used and protected. Moreover, the growth of the Internet, which can make personal information contained in electronic records more readily accessible to the general public, has heightened this concern. Finally, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the indication that some of the terrorists fraudulently obtained SSNs have added new urgency to the need to assess how SSNs are issued and protected and how Social Security data are used in safeguarding national security.

Indeed, SSA has an important role to play in protecting the integrity of the SSN. Given the widespread use of SSNs, the agency is considering steps to ensure that it is taking all necessary precautions to prevent individuals who are not entitled to SSNs from obtaining them. This may require SSA to find a new balance between two competing goals: the need to take time to verify documents submitted during the application process and the desire to serve the applicant as quickly as possible.

Since the terrorist attacks, SSA has had to reexamine the process by which it enumerates—gives SSNs and cards to individuals—to ensure that only those with a legal right to SSNs receive them. Since November 2001 SSA has been working with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Department of State to improve the verification of documents needed to assign SSNs to noncitizens and several initiatives are in the planning stages. In addition, SSA now verifies with the issuer of the record the birth records of all individuals over the age of 1 applying for original SSNs. Further, it no longer assigns SSNs for the sole purpose of obtaining driver's licenses to individuals who are not authorized to work. The agency also provided refresher training to staff involved in assigning SSNs and imposed additional management reviews.

---

<sup>23</sup> Since 1982, SSA has provided SSNs only to U.S. citizens, noncitizens authorized to work in the United States, and noncitizens with an approved nonwork reason for needing a number.

Once SSA has issued an SSN, however, it has little control over how the number is used by other government agencies and the private sector. We recently reported that SSNs are widely used across multiple agencies and departments at all levels of government.<sup>24</sup> They are used by agencies that deliver benefits and services to the public as a convenient and efficient means of managing records. More importantly, these agencies rely on SSNs when they share data with one another, for example, to make sure that only eligible individuals receive benefits and to collect any outstanding debt that individuals owe the government. Although these agencies are taking steps to safeguard the SSNs from improper disclosure, our work identified potential weaknesses in the security of information systems at all levels of government. In addition, SSNs are widely found in public records, that is, documents that are routinely made available to the public. Although some government agencies and courts are trying innovative approaches to prevent the SSN from appearing on public records, not all agencies maintaining public records have adopted these approaches. Moreover, increasing numbers of departments are considering placing or planning to place documents that may contain SSNs on the Internet, which would make these numbers much more readily available to others, raising the risk of their misuse.

We also found that SSNs are one of three personal identifiers most often sought by identity thieves, and that SSNs are often used to generate additional false documents, which can be used to set up false identities. What is harder to determine is a clear answer as to where identity thieves obtain the SSNs they misuse. Ultimately, the nation, with help from SSA, must grapple with the need to find the proper balance between the widespread and legitimate uses of personal information such as SSNs, by both government and the private sector, and the need to protect individual identity.

At the same time that SSA continues to protect SSNs and other personal information in its records, law enforcement needs for information have become ever more pressing. Law enforcement agencies at all levels of government seek assistance from SSA in obtaining information crucial to criminal investigations and, more recently, to protecting the homeland. The challenge SSA faces today in protecting the SSN will increasingly

---

<sup>24</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *Social Security Numbers: Government Benefits from SSN Use but Could Provide Better Safeguards*, [GAO-02-352](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2002).

---

require a balance between providing information needed to protect against terrorism and other violent crimes and protecting individual privacy and preventing identity theft.

---

# GAO Contacts

---

---

---

<b>Subject(s) covered in this report</b>	<b>Contact person</b>
Future service delivery	Barbara D. Bovbjerg, Director Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues (202) 512-7215 <a href="mailto:bovbjergb@gao.gov">bovbjergb@gao.gov</a>
Protection and use of personal information such as social security numbers	
Integrity of the Supplemental Security Income program	Robert E. Robertson, Director Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues (202) 512-7215 <a href="mailto:robertsonr@gao.gov">robertsonr@gao.gov</a>
Disability programs	
Information technology to support service delivery	Joel C. Willemsen, Managing Director Information Technology (202) 512-6408 <a href="mailto:willemsenj@gao.gov">willemsenj@gao.gov</a>

---

---

# Related GAO Products

---

---

## Performance and Accountability Series

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: A Governmentwide Perspective.* [GAO-01-241](#). Washington, D.C.: January 2001.

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Social Security Administration.* [GAO-01-261](#). Washington, D.C.: January 2001.

High-Risk Series: An Update. [GAO-01-273](#). Washington, D.C.: January 2001.

---

## Continue to Strengthen the Integrity of the SSI Program

*Supplemental Security Income: Progress Made in Detecting and Recovering Overpayments, but Management Attention Should Continue.* [GAO-02-849](#). Washington, D.C.: September 16, 2002.

*Supplemental Security Income: Status of Efforts to Improve Overpayment Detection and Recovery.* [GAO-02-962T](#). Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2002.

*Supplemental Security Income: Additional Actions Needed to Reduce Program Vulnerability to Fraud and Abuse.* [GAO/HEHS-99-151](#). Washington, D.C.: September 15, 1999.

*Supplemental Security Income: Long-Standing Issues Require More Active Management and Program Oversight.* [GAO/T-HEHS-99-51](#). Washington, D.C.: February 3, 1999.

*Supplemental Security Income: Action Needed on Long-Standing Problems Affecting Program Integrity.* [GAO/HEHS-98-158](#). Washington, D.C.: September 14, 1998.

---

## Improve Programs That Provide Support for Individuals with Disabilities

*SSA and VA Disability Programs: Re-Examination of Disability Criteria Needed to Help Ensure Program Integrity.* [GAO-02-597](#). Washington, D.C.: August 9, 2002.

*Social Security Disability: Disappointing Results From SSA's Efforts to Improve the Disability Claims Process Warrant Immediate Attention.* [GAO-02-322](#). Washington, D.C.: February 27, 2002.

*SSA Disability: SGA Levels Appear to Affect the Work Behavior of Relatively Few Beneficiaries, but More Data Needed.* [GAO-02-224](#). Washington, D.C.: January 16, 2002.



---

*SSA Disability: Other Programs May Provide Lessons for Improving Return-to-Work Efforts.* [GAO-01-153](#). Washington, D.C.: January 12, 2001.

*Social Security Disability: SSA Has Had Mixed Success in Efforts to Improve Caseload Management.* [GAO/T-HEHS-00-22](#). Washington, D.C.: October 21, 1999.

*SSA Disability Redesign: Actions Needed to Enhance Future Progress.* [GAO/HEHS-99-25](#). Washington, D.C.: March 12, 1999.

*Social Security Disability Insurance: Multiple Factors Affect Beneficiaries' Ability to Return to Work.* [GAO/HEHS-98-39](#). Washington, D.C.: January 12, 1998.

*Social Security: Disability Programs Lag in Promoting Return to Work.* [GAO/HEHS-97-46](#). Washington, D.C.: March 17, 1997.

*SSA Disability: SSA Return-to-Work Strategies From Other Systems May Improve Federal Programs.* [GAO-HEHS-96-133](#). Washington, D.C.: July 11, 1996.

*SSA Disability: Program Redesign Necessary to Encourage Return to Work.* [GAO/HEHS-96-62](#). Washington, D.C.: April 24, 1996.

---

**Better Position SSA for Future Service Delivery Challenges, Including Information Technology**

*Information Security: Additional Actions Needed to Fully Implement Reform Legislation.* [GAO-02-470T](#). Washington, D.C.: March 6, 2002.

*Information Technology: Enterprise Architecture Use Across the Federal Government Can Be Improved.* [GAO-02-6](#). Washington, D.C.: February 19, 2002.

*Information Technology Management: Social Security Administration Practices Can Be Improved.* [GAO-01-961](#). Washington, D.C.: August 21, 2001.

*Information Security: Serious and Widespread Weaknesses Persist at Federal Agencies.* [GAO/AIMD-00-295](#). Washington, D.C.: September 6, 2000.

---

*SSA Customer Service: Broad Service Delivery Plan Needed to Address Future Challenges.* [GAO/T-HEHS/AIMD-00-75](#). Washington, D.C.: February 10, 2000.

*Social Security Administration: Update on Year 2000 and Other Key Information Technology Initiatives.* [GAO/T-AIMD-99-259](#). Washington, D.C.: July 29, 1999.

*Information Security: Serious Weaknesses Place Critical Federal Operations and Assets at Risk.* [GAO/AIMD-98-92](#). Washington, D.C.: September 23, 1998.

---

**Strengthen Controls to Protect the Personal Information SSA Develops and Maintains**

*Social Security Numbers: Government Benefits from SSN Use but Could Provide Better Safeguards.* [GAO-02-352](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2002.

*Social Security Numbers: SSNs Are Widely Used by Government and Could Be Better Protected.* [GAO-02-691T](#). Washington, D.C.: April 29, 2002.

*Identity Theft: Prevalence and Cost Appear to be Growing.* [GAO-02-363](#). Washington, D.C.: March 1, 2002.

*Social Security: Government and Commercial Use of the Social Security Number Is Widespread.* [GAO/HEHS-99-28](#). Washington, D.C.: February 16, 1999.

---

# Performance and Accountability and High-Risk Series

---

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: A Governmentwide Perspective.* [GAO-03-95](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Agriculture.* [GAO-03-96](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Commerce.* [GAO-03-97](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Defense.* [GAO-03-98](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Education.* [GAO-03-99](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Energy.* [GAO-03-100](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Health and Human Services.* [GAO-03-101](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Homeland Security.* [GAO-03-102](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Housing and Urban Development.* [GAO-03-103](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of the Interior.* [GAO-03-104](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Justice.* [GAO-03-105](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Labor.* [GAO-03-106](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of State.* [GAO-03-107](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Transportation.* [GAO-03-108](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of the Treasury.* [GAO-03-109](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Department of Veterans Affairs.* [GAO-03-110](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: U.S. Agency for International Development.* [GAO-03-111](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Environmental Protection Agency.* [GAO-03-112](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Federal Emergency Management Agency.* [GAO-03-113](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: National Aeronautics and Space Administration.* [GAO-03-114](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Office of Personnel Management.* [GAO-03-115](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Small Business Administration.* [GAO-03-116](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: Social Security Administration.* [GAO-03-117](#).

*Major Management Challenges and Program Risks: U.S. Postal Service.* [GAO-03-118](#).

*High-Risk Series: An Update.* [GAO-03-119](#).

*High-Risk Series: Strategic Human Capital Management.* [GAO-03-120](#).

*High-Risk Series: Protecting Information Systems Supporting the Federal Government and the Nation's Critical Infrastructures.* [GAO-03-121](#).

*High-Risk Series: Federal Real Property.* [GAO-03-122](#).

---

## GAO's Mission

The General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

---

## Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through the Internet. GAO's Web site ([www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)) contains abstracts and full-text files of current reports and testimony and an expanding archive of older products. The Web site features a search engine to help you locate documents using key words and phrases. You can print these documents in their entirety, including charts and other graphics.

Each day, GAO issues a list of newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. GAO posts this list, known as "Today's Reports," on its Web site daily. The list contains links to the full-text document files. To have GAO e-mail this list to you every afternoon, go to [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov) and select "Subscribe to GAO Mailing Lists" under "Order GAO Products" heading.

---

## Order by Mail or Phone

The first copy of each printed report is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. A check or money order should be made out to the Superintendent of Documents. GAO also accepts VISA and Mastercard. Orders for 100 or more copies mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent. Orders should be sent to:

U.S. General Accounting Office  
441 G Street NW, Room LM  
Washington, D.C. 20548

To order by Phone:   Voice: (202) 512-6000  
                                  TDD: (202) 512-2537  
                                  Fax: (202) 512-6061

---

## To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact:

Web site: [www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm](http://www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm)

E-mail: [fraudnet@gao.gov](mailto:fraudnet@gao.gov)

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7470

---

## Public Affairs

Jeff Nelligan, Managing Director, [NelliganJ@gao.gov](mailto:NelliganJ@gao.gov) (202) 512-4800  
U.S. General Accounting Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149  
Washington, D.C. 20548

---

**United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001**

**Official Business  
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

**Address Service Requested**

---

**Presorted Standard  
Postage & Fees Paid  
GAO  
Permit No. GI00**

